

Like John Major before him, David Cameron has pragmatically managed his party's dissensions over Europe without addressing their fundamental sources.

by Blog Admin

Much as it did for his predecessors in the 1980s and 1990s, the “Europe Problem” has caused headaches for UK Prime Minister, David Cameron. While some have commented that Cameron has been more flexible on these issues than some of his predecessors, [Simon Usherwood](#) disagrees. He argues that David Cameron, just like John Major before him, has been unwilling to address the fundamental sources of the Conservative Party's split over Europe.



In [her recent EUOPP](#) article, Françoise Boucek discusses how David Cameron appears to have learnt lessons from the 1980s and 1990s about how to manage the European issue within the British Conservative party. Her argument is that rather than standing firm (in the model of John Major), Cameron has been much more flexible in shifting focus around and in reframing issues. Undoubtedly, the European issue has – more than any other – caused considerable pain to the Tories in recent decades, and Boucek argues that the profound lack of unity within the party contributed to their long period out of office between 1997 and 2010.

However, it is important to recognise that both in practice and in success, Cameron's approach is not so very different from Major's. If Thatcher was central to turning European integration into a live political issue during her premiership, it was only really with her removal from office in 1990 that it gained its vehemence: for many Thatcherites in the party, it was the association between her ousting and the UK's membership of the European Exchange Rate Membership (ERM) which confirmed their suspicions.

Despite this, Major was able to engage in a relatively positive European policy in the period through to the 1992 general election. He worked through the Maastricht negotiations with a large degree of flexibility, hampered more by lingering suspicion of British intentions than anything else: certainly, his resolution of the EMU and social chapter discussions, balanced with a strengthening of the ECJ and other elements, appeared to satisfy the large majority of his party at the time.

What was to undermine this was the surprise of the 1992 election, with its very small majority for Major. At a stroke, this gave sceptics a powerful lever to apply pressure, especially in the face of a tactically complicit Labour party. The debacle of Black Wednesday, when the UK crashed out of ERM, and the bitter fight over Maastricht ratification, both poisoned the issue for all involved and required Major to seek compromises where possible. Hence the vetoing of Jean-Luc Dehaene as Commission President in 1994, the [Ioannina compromise](#) of the same year, and the very strong reaction to the BSE beef ban from 1996. All of these were essentially symbolic compromises on his underlying position. All of Major's successors as party leader, up until Cameron, floundered on the issue of the EU, albeit in different ways, but similarly in that they did not try to put it to one side, most obviously with William Hague trying to save the pound. The main consequence was to allow



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the party to undergo a generational shift towards scepticism.

As Boucek notes, Cameron wanted the Tories to ‘stop banging on about Europe’: i.e. ignore it, or at least not discuss it in public. Much like Major before him, Cameron’s position on the EU is best characterised as one of management, rather than hard-wired principle. Both could reasonably be described as pragmatists on the issue. Thus we saw Cameron expounding no firm policy on matters European except the movement of the European Conservatives and Reformists group out of the European People’s Party (EPP) after the 2009 European Parliament elections, a move that still looks deeply questionable in terms of influence and stability. Likewise in the 2010 general election, there was little beyond the commitment to a referendum on the Lisbontreaty ‘if still active’, which (he decided) it was not. This echoes Major’s commitment to a vote on the single currency in 1997, in large part predicated on the small chance of winning that election. Even the current activity on various fronts is not about closing down engagement with the EU: the [Review of the Balance of Competences](#) is simply a mapping exercise, not a cost-benefit one; the muttering about the Financial Perspectives is par for the course.

The two obvious points where we might challenge this are the Europe Act and the Fiscal Compact negotiations late last year. The former can be seen as a miscalculation on the part of Cameron, who (reasonably enough) thought that treaty reform was a distant prospect in 2010; much as the French commitment to a referendum on enlargement was a tactical move, so too was this. Similarly, the latter was a misstep, as evidenced by the rapid re-engagement of British officials in the negotiations after the December 2011 European Council.

In short, Cameron has been no different to Major. Both have taken opportunities where possible. Both have tried to deflect pressure: Major with his leadership vote, Cameron with his movement towards a referendum. But both are/were essentially committed to British membership of the Union: both have seen considerable expansions in EU competence (just as Thatcher did before them). Moreover, both have shown an unwillingness to address the fundamental sources of the internal split, and that is why we are still having the same conversations that we were twenty years ago.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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